

The Use of Dance in Religion

**An Honors Thesis (DANCE 490)**

**By**

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A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Sarah Mangelsdorf". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Sarah" written in a larger, more prominent script than the last name "Mangelsdorf".

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## Abstract

Since the beginning of time, dance has been used as a form of communication, celebration, and as a part of rituals. It also has played a large part in the realm of religion in many cultures. From the people groups of Chinese culture, to the tribes of Africa, dance has always been a part of spiritual life. In recent history, dance in many places has been transformed into a form of entertainment. However, it is still used by some as a form of worship. In the following, I will discuss a brief history of the use of dance in China and Africa, and then give a written report of my process in creating my own religious dance piece.

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### The Use of Dance in Religion

Dance is a universal form of communication. It is used to communicate, celebrate, and commemorate. For thousands of years, dance has been used in many cultures as part of every day social life and entertainment, as a form of communicating history, and as part of religious ceremonies. The most interesting uses of dance are within the Chinese and Africa cultures. This paper will contain a brief history of the use of dance in Chinese and African cultures. Later, I will describe a work of religious dance that I created, as well as my process of creating this piece.

Dance in the Chinese culture is fundamental. However, it was not always used as a form of entertainment. "The early Chinese folk dances, like other forms of primitive art, were essentially ritual enactments of superstitious beliefs performed in the hope of a good harvest, or - in the case of the earliest Chinese folk dances - in the hope of a good hunt, since the earliest Chinese folk dances were performed by hunter-gatherer folk." (China Highlights) Evidence of dances in Chinese culture date back to 6,000BC; this was even before written Chinese characters were created. Later, dance was used in the spiritual realm to refresh the body, give wisdom, and get rid of unwanted dreams or thoughts.

In prehistoric times, "Shamanism" was the original form of dance in China. This dance was considered a ritual, and it came in many forms—including the "Wu" dance,

Dongba dance, Qamo, Cham, and black hat dance. The shaman dance “Wu” is one of the most intriguing. Wu means sorcerer and it is the name of the dance. (China Highlights) This dance was considered to be a part of the sorcerer at birth. It was believed that this dance was a way for the sorcerer—a mere man—to communicate with the gods.

The Qamo and Cham were religious dances connected to Buddhism. The Cham dance was used as a ritual to attempt to expel evil spirits and demons from a village and its people. It was also supposed to be a form of communication that was accompanied by animal sacrifices, which were to please the divine protectors. Qamo was a dance in the southwest part of China, and it has similar attributes as the Cham. The Qamo, “is performed with the belief to subdue the evil spirits in monasteries. It is a remarkable art form combining scripture chanting in perfect union with music and dance. Monks with a solemn and splendid atmosphere perform it in temples.” (Chinese Symbols)

Africa, too, has a very strong and unbreakable connection with dance. Although African dance is used in everyday life for socializing and entertainment, it is still used today as a ritual. In fact, African ritual dance is relatively unchanging—the bone and blood of African culture—with deep psychological and religious roots. (Warren, 6) These rituals are commonly used to serve as a memorial to the origins of the world. Other uses are to prepare a people group for planting season, the harvest, or honoring a spirit or dead ruler. Often ritual dances include both physical movement and verbal story telling to enhance the telling of a historic tale.

African dance is a corporate activity in which everyone participates in some capacity. The Abofoo dance is one example of this. The Abofoo is a hunting ritual dance done by the Krachi people of Africa. The dance is used to help preserve physical life and give strength. It is performed both before and after a hunt. This dance is considered absolutely necessary to ensure the hunters' luck that is needed for success.

Today in the United States, dance is used in many ways. The majority of these uses are for simple entertainment. However, there are some people who choose to use dance as an act of worship. Although it is not practiced in all denominations, some denominations of Christianity are very supportive of dance as an act of worshiping God. Some denominations have created strict rules against the participation or involvement with dancing. But many others have chosen to follow the instructions in sacred scripture to dance. There are several places in the Christian Bible where dance is mentioned as a form of praise to the Lord. One example would be Psalms 149:3, "Let them praise His name with dancing, making melody to Him with tambourine and lyre!" (English Standard Version, Psalms 149:3)

For the Senior Choreography Showcase of Fall 2011, I chose to choreograph a modern, Christian dance piece about love. I chose to choreograph a duet—which was danced by Renee Cirone and Alex Kingma—because I wanted a specific idea of love to be portrayed. This type of love that I am referring to is "agape." Agape is described as a spiritual, unconditional, and everlasting love. It is selfless and pursues, even when nothing good may come in return. In 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 13:4-8, a perfect description of this kind of love is given:

“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, and always preserves. Love never fails.”  
(English Standard Version, 1 Cor. 13:4-8)

I feel that this agape form of love exists because of God's love for the world. He loved us enough to sacrifice His perfect son, Jesus Christ, to die for the world's sin. This sacrifice is the ultimate example of love. I originally wanted to just have my piece show a deep love. But as I progressed in my choreography, my ideas slightly altered. I did not just want there to be a love that was simply accepted and reciprocated. I wanted there to be a more realistic struggle as the love progressed.

In this piece, Renee is representing my early struggles with accepting the Lord. Alex is to represent the constant pursuit of Christ's love for me. To keep true to reality, I decided that Renee's character needed first to fight against or reject the love that Alex embodied. I related deeply to this in my own life experience. To show rejection, I would have Renee push Alex away from her, run away from him, or reach out to him and then pull back. On the contrary, Alex would constantly be watching Renee and would always be reaching out for her. I chose to have Renee later switch from rejecting Alex, to being interested in what he was. At this point, her movements changed to have a magnetic pull towards Alex that she could not fully fight off. By the end of the piece, I decided to resolve the situation by having Renee fully accept and become engrossed in Alex. Although there are several changes in movement for Renee, Alex stays fairly consistent in his energy towards Renee. Alex continually pursues Renee, regardless of

how hard she tries to push him away. As I stated, my finished product ended up depicting how I fought against accepting the reality of Christ's love for me, and this is what made this project so dear to me.

I chose to have a few choreographed themes that showed up at different times in the piece. One dancer often did these phrases at a time toward the beginning of the piece, and then later would resurface in unison. This choreographic technique was supposed to signify the couple's gradual connection and unity that developed as the piece progressed.

On the topic of specific style and choreography, I chose to create a mix of modern dance and contemporary ballet. I chose this because this is the style that I connect to most, both physically and emotionally. This made it a lot easier for me to create movement that was closely connected to the feelings of my heart. This is the dance style that I can see and feel in my mind, body, and soul when listening to powerful music.

I used constant reach and rebound floor patterns. I had the dancers continually move away from one another, but they would gradually—and sometimes unknowingly—migrate back towards one another. I wanted there to be evidence in the dance that, even though they did not mean to be together, that they had to be. For the most part, every time the dancers met and made contact, they were in the center of the stage. I wanted this to show a universal connection between the two beings that always existed, even if they were apart. Also, I used a lot of reaching movements—especially for Alex. I wanted Renee to be reaching or searching for something at the beginning of the piece,

because she is lost and trying to find her path. Meanwhile, Alex is consistently reaching out for Renee, moving toward her, and even watching her. This demonstrated that he truly pursued her, even when she did not realize it.

The costumes for this piece were very easy for me to decide on. I wanted my dancers to look simple and pedestrian. Alex wore a plain white shirt and black pants. Renee was in a short black dance skirt and shorts combo with a lovely plum colored shirt. Both dancers were barefoot during the dance. I felt that it would be necessary to put Renee in a soft, flowing outfit because most of her movement matched those two adjectives. I wanted Alex to be in a clean-cut simple outfit to represent stability, consistency, and purity. White also symbolized innocence for Alex because his love for Renee was not lustful, but rather passionate, caring, and unselfish, as if she were a child. I did, at one point, consider having the dancers wear shoes. Should would make it seem like the two were walking through their typical path's in life, and then they were just thrown together. However, I decided against this because I wanted there to be a more natural feel to their paths crossing.

If I had the chance to restage this dance, I would make the costumes slightly more complex, while still keeping the initial pure feeling. I would have Renee in a dress that was a few inches above the knee, with light pink tights and pointe shoes. Alex would have dark colored pants that match the color of Renee's dress, but he would still be wearing a white shirt. His white shirt would be a three-quarter length sleeve, tight-fitting polyester shirt that could button up.



I was very pleased with this dance as a whole. I loved how well my dancers performed the choreography they were given, and I really enjoyed the natural chemistry that the dancers had as a couple. It is very important to have dancers that are able to connect, not only with the movement and music, but also with the other dancers around them. I found that this creates a much more real and pure type of emotional reaction from both the dancers and the audience. It was clear that this piece was based on love; however, I wish that the type of love were a little more apparent.

If I could make a few changes to my choreography, I would choose to make this dance a little more balletic. The female role would definitely be put on pointe. I would use less of the modern movement and move closer to the strictly contemporary ballet style. I feel that contemporary ballet would be expressive enough to get across the story that I am attempting to portray, but it would also add a sense of clean structure with losing the fluidity of the movement.

I found myself throughout my entire choreographic process constantly falling into the movements that I personally connect with the most. However, I found that some of the things that I can connect to and make authentic emotion from are different from what others feel they connect to. I went through several changes in the choreography to not only cater to the specific strengths and talents of my dancers, but also to make it easier for them to connect with the choreography. In doing this, I was able to create a piece that was authentic emotionally for my dancers. They could really feel something other than their body moving them through the dance. This dance, for that reason, was my way of showing gratitude to God for giving me this talent, and well as a way to show a glimpse of the beauty of the Lord's love for all the world.

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